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AUTHOR Love, Patrick G.; Simmons, Janice M.
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ABSTRACT

Cheating and plagiarism were studied at a midwestern public university's College of Education, by interviewing three male and three female students who were in Master's programs in health education, rehabilitation counseling, and community counseling. None of the six students had had a formal orientation program covering expectations about performance, rules, or policies. While there seemed to be an assumption that Master's students should know what constitutes cheating and plagiarism, most respondents were unable to identify how they learned about these concepts. Three students thought there might be specific behaviors related to plagiarism about which students were unaware. Although cheating and plagiarism seemed to be occurring, the respondents were uncertain about the sanctions for these behaviors. Factors noted as contributing to cheating included: pressures related to grades, the number of assignments, and running out of time; leniency of professors and their tendency to avoid addressing these issues; lack of awareness of the rules of plagiarism; and personal attitudes such as wanting to avoid hard work or lack of interest in the topic. Factors noted as inhibiting cheating and plagiarism included fear and guilt, personal confidence, positive professional ethics, and the desire to work or learn. Implications of the findings for practice and research are considered. (Contains 18 references.) (SW)

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The Meaning and Mediated Nature of Cheating and Plagiarism Among Graduate Students in a College of Education

Patrick G. Love

Assistant Professor

Higher Education Administration and Student Personnel

Kent State University

Janice M. Simmons

Residence Director

Ursuline College

ASHE

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Texas A&M University
Department of Educational
Administration
College Station, TX 77843
(409) 845-0393

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, November 6-9, 1997. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Meaning and Mediated Nature of Cheating and Plagiarism Among Graduate Students in a College of Education

Abstract

The paper reports on a qualitative study of cheating and plagiarism with six master's students in a College of Education. Findings relate to the students' understandings of cheating and plagiarism, the lack of formal orientation to expectations related to these behaviors, and the internal and external factors that contribute to or inhibit these behaviors. Implications for practice and future research are suggested.

Researchers of student behavior know that a large percentage of undergraduate students cheat (e.g., Collison, 1990a, 1990b; Jendrek, 1989; Singhal, 1982; Stern & Havlicek, 1986; Tom & Borin, 1988). While the range and depth of research on undergraduate academic dishonesty are great, the literature is relatively quiet on the issue of graduate student cheating. This despite Brown's (1995) study which found that graduate business students were not more ethical than their undergraduate counterparts. While the graduate students participating in that study believed themselves to be more ethical, the occurrences of dishonest behaviors were similar, as were reasons for such behavior, mainly to obtain high grades. Additionally, Sierles, Hendrickx, and Circle (1980) found that 58.2% of medical students admitted cheating.

There is also evidence in studies of undergraduates that cheating at the graduate level should be a concern. For example, Greene and Saxe (1992) found that 81% of the undergraduates they surveyed indicated that they had cheated at some point in their undergraduate career and 77% of their sample intended to attend graduate or professional school. Given the prevalence of cheating at the undergraduate level and the fact that many of the students who have cheated go onto graduate school, issues of cheating and academic dishonesty at the graduate level need to be further examined. Yet, the focus of most research on cheating has remained primarily on undergraduates. While implications of that information may be helpful in dealing with graduate students, they cannot substitute for research based on the graduate student population. When considering research focusing on graduate education students, the number of studies drops considerably. Ferrell and Ferguson (1993) examined the propensity of graduate education students toward academic dishonesty. These students, according to the researchers, tended to commit behaviors which were considered less severe forms of misconduct.

In additional, little research has focused on how graduate students are oriented and socialized into behaviors and attitudes related to cheating and plagiarism. At the undergraduate level, Nuss (1984) found that 53% of the faculty surveyed rarely or never discussed university or faculty policies related to cheating and plagiarism with their students. At the graduate level, Anderson and Louis (1991) discovered that science and engineering students acquire the values and normative behaviors of their profession through informal means, mainly through observing others acting in appropriate ways. While relying on informal means of socialization may work much of the time, they also found that it may backfire if students observe inappropriate behavior, causing students to partake in behaviors that are opposite the profession's norms. Kalichman and Friedman (1992) also stressed the need for formal socialization of students into a profession's norms. In their research on biomedical trainees, they found that a majority of the students had observed, taken part in, or would consider participating in misconduct. In addition, they found a twofold increase in the probability of committing research misconduct if one had previously observed misconduct taking place. These findings imply that by understanding the forces that influence graduate student behavior, faculty can try to create contexts that are more conducive to honest and ethical behavior.

Given the relative dearth of research on graduate students, we decided to explore this

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issue with graduate students in several master's programs at a public university. The following questions guided this study:

-What are these graduate students' understandings of cheating and plagiarism and the penalties for those caught cheating or plagiarizing?
-To what degree are these issues addressed as part of their orientation and socialization to graduate school?
-What is their perception of the prevalence of cheating and plagiarism?
-What factors influence cheating and plagiarism behavior?

METHODOLOGY

Six first-year master's students (three male, three female) were recruited from three different master's programs in the College of Education at Middle State University. First year master's students were recruited and interviewed prior to the spring semester in order to better capture perceptions of socialization and orientation experiences related to their graduate program. There were two students each from health education, rehabilitation counseling, and community counseling. Each student participated in an in-depth interview, ranging in length from one to four hours, which included sorting from most serious to least serious a list of behaviors that were considered cheating or plagiarizing. The list of behaviors used in this study was based on Ferrell and Ferguson's (1993) Academic Misconduct Survey. It categorized 41 statements of misconduct into five constructs, "cheating on tests and assignments, use of illegal resources, quasi-misconduct, subtle manipulation, and bold manipulation" (p. 8). In the present study, the sort was used as a means of obtaining additional, in-depth qualitative information. Following the first interview, the sort was reduced to 16 items to eliminate redundant information and focus on behaviors more likely to be of concern to graduate students.

The interviews were transcribed and all six were analyzed by both researchers. Data analysis proceeded using the unitizing and categorizing methods adapted from Guba and Lincoln's (1989) constructivist inquiry methodology. In order to enhance the authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) of the data analysis, the two researchers conducted each step of the analysis separately. Following each step the results were compared, similarities in coding were noted and differences were discussed, analyzed, and synthesized. The process of unitization was compared after coding a single interview and again after all six interviews were coded. Initial emergent categories were also discussed after the initial coding was complete. Each researcher then proceeded to further categorize the unitized data. Following the process of categorization, the results again were compared, similarities in categories were noted and differences were discussed, analyzed, synthesized, and rewritten.

FINDINGS

The findings of the analysis are grouped into the following categories: orientation and socialization experiences; definitions, sanctions, and prevalence of cheating and plagiarism; and factors that influence the likelihood of a student cheating or plagiarizing.

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Orientation Experiences

None of these six students representing three different programs in a college of education had a formal orientation program. The most formal of any orientation program was a reception held on a Friday evening at the end of September for new students, current students, faculty, and alumni of the community counseling program. Faculty were introduced, so that students could "put faces with names," and alumni of the program had an opportunity to share their experiences with the new students after the faculty left. The primary focus of the program appeared to have been introductions and social interaction, though alumni shared some of their experiences and frustrations with the program. This particular program occurred about a month into the semester, so its effectiveness as an orienting experience is questionable, as students had exposure to at least a month of informal socializing experiences prior to it. The health education program area invited all faculty and students at the beginning of the semester to a professor's home. The professor was teaching one of the classes that most of the new students were taking. This event also had a focus on introductions and social interaction.

One student spoke of being oriented through personal interactions with the chairperson of the rehabilitation counseling program he was entering. A number of the students spoke of the frustration of having no orientation. Their frustration focused on the difficulty of learning to negotiate a new place. In no case were expectations about performance, behaviors, or quality of work shared with the students by faculty. No rules, regulations, or policies were highlighted or emphasized. The closest anyone came to specifying policies and procedures was reflected in the comment of one student, "Basically, they just gave us the catalog and suggested that we read the policies and various procedures." Without a formal orientation program prior to or at the start of the program, the socialization process was left to the dominant culture of the program--typically the student culture. One student mentioned that he learned "rules" [in this case, the proper format of class papers] through other students. As indicated above, Nuss (1984) found that most faculty at the undergraduate level do not discuss academic dishonesty policies with their students. These graduate students experienced similar behaviors. As one student indicated, "I think there's an understanding that at the graduate level, [cheating and plagiarism] is unacceptable behavior and a lot of instructors almost seem as though they feel that 'Well, if I have to address that to you, maybe you shouldn't be a graduate student.'"

Socialization to Cheating and Plagiarism

If the preceding quotation represents the feelings of some faculty and the experiences of some master's students, it also reflects the assumption that master's students should know what cheating and plagiarism is by the time they reach graduate school. In addition to being asked about their definitions of cheating and plagiarism [discussed below], the participants were asked how they came to learn about cheating and plagiarism in general. Unsurprisingly, the dominant pattern for the participants was an inability to identify how they came to learn about these concepts. Some of the participants said they assumed that they learned about cheating at home or in grade school [two participants specifically mentioned their parochial grade school experience and an emphasis on not cheating]. Four of the students could not recall ever discussing cheating or plagiarism as undergraduates or vaguely recalled an instance where it

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might have come up (typically about plagiarism). This can mean one of at least two different things: that they actually were not involved in discussions of cheating or plagiarism or that they did not attend to discussions on this topic because they assumed they already knew what cheating and/or plagiarism were.

There were two exceptions to the pattern of being unable to recall any specific discussions of these concepts as undergraduates. One student attended a large research university and was in the honors program. She talked about having received a plagiarism summary, having one professor specifically discuss the issue in class, and indicated that penalties for cheating and plagiarism were specified in every syllabus. The other student attended a liberal arts institution and worked as an undergraduate teaching assistant and an orientation instructor where sanctions for plagiarism were emphasized. He was also in the psychology program where the department chair "harped on plagiarism and appropriate citations." In both these instances there appeared to be specific contexts (i.e., honors program, undergraduate teaching assistantship, job in the psychology department) that led to a discussion of cheating and plagiarism.

Definitions of Cheating and Plagiarism

It was clear from analyzing the data that these students had a basic understanding of cheating and plagiarism, although there were some specific actions defined as cheating of which some were either unaware or did not see as cheating (e.g., submitting the same paper in two different classes, collaborating on individual assignments). They also viewed plagiarism as the dominant subset of cheating. Each person identified plagiarism as taking someone else's work and claiming it as one's own. However, three students indicated that there may be some specific behaviors related to plagiarism about which students may be unaware. One student differentiated cheating from plagiarism when she indicated that "People know when they are cheating, but might not know when they are plagiarizing."

Five of the subjects used plagiarism as their definition of cheating. Closely related to this was that five of the six remarked that it was cheating to use someone else's work (e.g., homework, a paper) as one's own. Five of the six mentioned using information that was not one's own on a test (four of the six specifically mentioned the use of notes or "cheat sheets"). The sixth participant focused his definition of cheating solely on plagiarism. Two participants mentioned using information that was not one's own in research. Other examples mentioned by single participants included not following format rules in the syllabus, talking during a test, collaborating (i.e., a group reviewing class notes together), falsifying information, using a secondary source as a primary source, and not providing an appropriate reference or citation. Three of the six participants indicated that the specific definition of cheating in a particular instance depended upon the professor.

It also appeared to two of the students that the operationalized definition of cheating and plagiarism depended upon the educational context, specifically, the level of education (i.e., primary school, high school, college, graduate school). For example, one student mentioned that

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as a senior in high school her teachers tried to scare her and her fellow students saying that college would be different, referring to issues of cheating, implying that cheating was taken more seriously in college. Another participant indicated the belief that individuals are socialized to issues of cheating based on the norms of the actual environment of learning, such as elementary school, secondary school, or higher education. Both of these students implied that there were different norms and expectations related to cheating and plagiarism for different levels of education, that is, some inappropriate behavior that was not taken seriously when they were undergraduates would be taken more seriously in graduate school. This expectation on the part of these students further supports the need for research on cheating and plagiarism specific to graduate and professional education.

Sanctions for Cheating and Plagiarism

Whereas the participants were confident in their definitions of cheating and plagiarism, all were more tentative and some specifically indicated that they were unsure or did not know what the sanctions were for cheating or plagiarism. This refers to either sanctions in general or those specified at their current institution. The possible sanctions cited by the participants ran the gamut from very lenient to quite severe. Sanctions identified by the participants were receiving a warning, receiving an incomplete, failing the test paper, failing the class, being placed on probation, being suspended, and being dismissed. A student's intentions played a role in determining sanctions for some of the participants, in that if a student did something unintentionally they believed there should be a lesser penalty. This referred specifically to plagiarism, because, as indicated above, the participants believed a student might not know when they inadvertently plagiarized something.

Prevalence of Cheating and Plagiarism

The purpose of this study was not to quantify acts of cheating and plagiarism on the part of master's students. However, given the lack of research related to the prevalence of cheating among graduate education students, the information discovered in these interviews indicated that there should be concern related to cheating and plagiarism among master's students. Five of the six interviews were conducted during the first semester of graduate study, and the sixth was conducted just prior to the start of the individual's second semester. Given the fact that these interviews were conducted early in their program and the fact that some of the participants were part-time, their awareness of cheating and plagiarism at the graduate level might be assumed to be quite limited. In some instances, this was the case, however, there was evidence that these students were aware of acts of cheating and plagiarism by other students.

First of all, three participants came into their programs with the assumption that cheating and plagiarism occurred at the graduate level. As one individual indicated, "I can't see how plagiarism couldn't be a significant issue especially as we get stressed to do papers, theses, or dissertations." This student and others also were aware of specific instances of cheating at the graduate level. The examples cited were a student getting answers to an exam and distributing them to other students, a doctoral student submitting the same paper in two different classes, and being aware that students helped each other on a regular basis with projects that were supposed

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to be independent. One participant indicated that she never cheated, but later in the interview gave a clear example of disobeying the requirements of an assignment, in this case collaborating with other students on what was to have been an independent take-home assignment. Another participant admitted to padding bibliographies and turning in the same paper in two different classes. In all, from this small sample of students there was substantial evidence that cheating and plagiarism was evident in their programs.

Factors Mediating Cheating and Plagiarism Behavior

Analysis of the data revealed a wide range of factors that influenced the graduate students' behavior related to cheating and plagiarism. Not all students expressed all of these factors. The desire was not to identify the most important factors, but to identify the range of possible factors influencing the behavior of these graduate students as it related to cheating and plagiarism. Inclusion as a factor required either its identification in at least two sets of interview data or extensive focus if only identified in one set of data. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of data sets providing evidence of this factor. There were two major categories of factors related to cheating and plagiarism behaviors--those factors that inhibited the behavior and those that fostered cheating and plagiarism (labeled contributing factors).

Inhibiting factors

Analysis revealed 13 categories of factors that encouraged students to do honest work or to avoid cheating or plagiarism. These factors were further defined as those internal to the student and those that were external or environmental factors.

Internal inhibiting factors. Analysis of the data revealed eight internal factors that inhibited cheating or plagiarism. These internal factors were either the individual's personally held values that tended to encourage them to behave in honest and ethical ways or other attitudes or concerns that caused them to avoid cheating and plagiarism. We termed these types positive (toward honest behavior) or negative (away from dishonest behavior) factors. We identified five positive factors, and two negative factors.

(a) Positive factors. Positive factors were those internal value states that encouraged students to conduct themselves in honest, ethical, and rule abiding ways. The five factors were personal confidence, professional ethics, desire to work and learn, fairness, and respect for others.

1. Personal confidence (4) - Four of the students mentioned such terms as personal confidence, arrogance, independence, pride, and self-respect as reasons why they would not consider cheating or plagiarizing.

"I'm more independent than that, and it would be embarrassing for me to think that I could only pass by getting the answers from other students."

2. Positive professional ethics (4) - Going beyond one's personal sense of self, there was evidence of personal or professional ethics influencing what constituted appropriate and inappropriate behavior in a school-related setting.

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"I think [insinuating sexual intimacy] is disgusting. It's terrible and it shows no morals."

"How can you expect your research to be credible or worth anything if you're sitting here making up, you know, 'I got this from sources that don't exist' that doesn't lend any credibility."

"If a situation arose that needed me to turn in a paper late, I would probably just be truthful."

3. Fairness to authors (5) - Related to professional ethics, fairness to authors emerged as a strong internal factor underlying students' tendency toward honest behavior. Fairness most often related to authors and plagiarism.

"[It is] disrespectful to the author whose research you're using."

"You're taking someone else's study that they worked on and put all that work into."

"The person who wrote the work did a lot of research, and I think that it is totally unfair and illegal and all that to [copy large sections]."

4. Desire to work or learn (4) - Through several statements some of the students revealed that one of the reasons they were in graduate school was to work and learn and that cheating and plagiarism would undermine their ability to learn. One student, in discussing whether it was proper to turn in the same paper twice, did not discuss this as an example of cheating, but questioned it on the basis of "you didn't learn anything."

"You're losing the whole meaning for doing research if you go and fabricate the conclusion."

"I . . . want to get out what I [can from] each different class."

5. Fairness to others (1) - Whereas "fairness to authors" related to the authors of potentially plagiarized material, fairness to others related to fellow students or researchers who would suffer if resource material was stolen, damaged, or destroyed.

"Not only did that affect me, but . . . I would think a lot of people who are coming and looking for the journal, and looking for a page, and all of the sudden it's torn out."

(b) Negative factors. Negative factors were those internal states that caused an individual to avoid cheating or plagiarism (as opposed to embracing honest behavior). The two factors identified were fear and guilt.

1. Fear (2) - Fear appeared to be a powerful inhibiter for two of the students interviewed. Among the fears identified were the fears of being caught, and then subsequent to that the fear of losing one's job, negatively impacting one's career, and the fear of embarrassment.

"I'm too much of a chicken and I get nervous. I don't like getting caught."

"I don't want to jeopardize my career."

2. Guilt (2) - Two students mentioned feelings of guilt as an inhibiting factor. One student in particular indicated that although the possibility of being caught was a factor, an even greater factor was the guilt he would feel.

"It's just I would feel tremendous guilt if I just came out and said something that was

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totally a lie."

"In some cases I have to admit I did look at people's things and then all of the sudden the guilt complex comes in."

External inhibiting factors. These factors were those identified as existing outside of the student, either in the environment or the context of the learning situation, that caused a student to avoid cheating and plagiarism. These external factors included professors' knowledge of the subject matter, the probability of being caught, time pressure (i.e., the time and effort needed to cheat), the fact that cheating is dangerous, the type of work required (e.g., reflection papers), and the need for knowledge in the future (e.g., for licensure exams).

1. Professors' knowledge (5) - Professors' knowledge referred to the belief on the part of students that their professors were quite familiar with all the literature in their field, so an attempt at plagiarism would be difficult to get by them. Beyond this there was the assumption that professors were infallible experts and could see through any attempt at cheating (e.g., being able to tell when a student had just read an article abstract and not the whole article).

"[The probability of being caught is] fairly high if you were to try to plagiarize and not cite your sources because most of the information you're using would be very familiar to our instructors."

"[The professors] have read it all."

2. Probability of being caught (6) - The probability of being caught was an issue that often came up as students were trying to decide if they would attempt an action related to cheating or plagiarism. This was related to "knowledge of professors" and appeared to be a powerful external factor that inhibited their actions related to cheating or plagiarism. This relates to internal inhibiting factor of fear, but takes into consideration factors outside of themselves.

"If you're talking about also getting caught, I mean, it's so easy to check out sources, I would think."

"It's absolutely pretty stupid [to plagiarize because] you can't cover your tracks."

3. Time pressure (3) - According to three students cheating and plagiarism took too much time and energy. In a subconscious cost-benefit analysis, the time it would take to plan and not get caught encouraged these students to avoid cheating or plagiarism.

"I've never [cheated.] It's too much energy."

"It probably takes as much time and energy to do all that, cause if you just studied and put the same time and energy into studying [you would succeed]."

4. Cheating as dangerous (3) - Several students mentioned that a reason to avoid cheating was because it was dangerous. This referred to manipulating data in research resulting in misinforming people or causing people to not be as trained or skilled as they should be, such as in the case of a doctor or counselor.

"Cheating causes people to know less and be less prepared."

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5. Type of work required (2) - The type of work required and the next factor, "the need for knowledge in the future," were both factors mentioned by the two students who were in the counseling program. In the case of type of work required, both students indicated that there was less need to or an inability to cheat or plagiarize on the types of assignments they received in class, such as reflection papers and self-exploration papers.

6. Need for knowledge in the future (2) - Also mentioned by the two counseling students, this factor referred to either specific knowledge to help them pass licensure exams or seeing a much clearer connection between the knowledge and skills gained in their classes and what they would need in order to be successful counselors in the future.

"Even if I can pull it off, it's not going to benefit me professionally."

Contributing factors

The five sets of factors that contributed to the likelihood of cheating among the participants were those of pressure, professors, negative personal attitudes, lack of awareness, and lack of competence. These factors were divided into external and internal contributing factors. Pressure and professors were external contributing factors and personal attitudes, lack of awareness, and lack of competence were internal contributing factors. External contributing factors were stronger and more evident than internal factors, so they are described first.

External Contributing Factors.

(a) Pressure. Although time pressure was identified as an external inhibiting factor, pressure was identified as the strongest factor contributing to the possibility of cheating or plagiarizing. The dominant types of pressure were grade pressure, time pressure, and task pressure. These three types of pressure were interrelated in that, for example, in many cases without some time constraints the likelihood of feeling task pressure was lessened.

1. Grade pressure (5) - Although none of the participants in this study indicated feeling grade pressure at the time of the interview, most of them mentioned grade pressure as a form of pressure that would increase the likelihood of a graduate student cheating or plagiarizing. One participant knew of a conditionally admitted student who mistakenly ended up with the professor's book which had test questions in it and copied those questions in order to ensure getting off probation.

"Sometimes ethics takes a back seat to getting a grade."

"A grade focused person is more likely to cheat."

2. Time pressure (4) - Participants talked about "getting behind in work" and running out of time as another type of pressure that would contribute to the possibility of someone cheating or plagiarizing.

"I've only [cheated] when I really haven't studied enough."

3. Task pressure (4) - Task pressure relates to the number and types of assignments a student is struggling to complete during a given time period.

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"I can't see how plagiarism couldn't be a significant issue especially as we get stressed to do papers, theses, or dissertations."

"If I were bogged down and not concentrating and not really looking at where I was pulling quotes from [then I might plagiarize a few phrases]."

(b) Professors (5). Leniency of professors and a tendency to avoid addressing issues of cheating and plagiarism were seen as factors contributing to cheating and plagiarism among graduate students. Some students mentioned specific examples of professors turning their heads or giving examples of how they cheated as graduate students (e.g., loading equations into a calculator for a calculus exam). However, a greater tendency appeared to place responsibility for cheating primarily on faculty's unwillingness to confront possible instances of cheating. This failure to confront behaviors considered cheating was then taken by a number of students as permission to continue those behaviors. For example, "If the instructor would have come down on all of us after the first test [when they talked to each other about the answers], it would have totally changed my behavior." There were students who even blamed the professor if they trusted students to do independent work without supervision. In the case of an independent take home exam, one student declared, "If the professor truly wanted something to be an independent activity, then it should have been given in class." This is similar to Greene and Saxe's (1992) finding that undergraduate students placed blame for cheating on their parents (i.e., putting pressure on them to achieve) and on professors. Students in that study indicated that professors either demanded too much [previous factor--"pressure"] or were lazy (e.g., using same tests year after year). The perceptions of these students in this study go beyond Nuss' finding (1984) that most faculty fail to discuss these issues with students, to the perceptions that some faculty are unwilling to confront instances of cheating.

Internal Contributing Factors.

(a) Negative personal attitudes (5). Negative personal attitudes are the converse of positive professional ethics. Whereas acting on positive professional ethics made a student less likely to cheat, these attitudes were part of a mindset that appeared to make cheating and plagiarism more likely. These attitudes were abstracted from statements students made about themselves and from statements they made about other students. The attitudes identified included a desire to avoid hard work, lack of interest in the topic, cheating or plagiarism as easier than doing the work (i.e., laziness), because you could get away with cheating or plagiarism, and trying to make oneself look better (e.g., padding a reference list).

(b) Lack of Awareness (4). A person's intention was identified as a factor in the definition of plagiarism, that is, someone unknowingly or unwittingly using another's work inappropriately was considered "less wrong." Related to intentionality was the notion that one's lack of awareness of the rules of plagiarism was a contributing factor to the possibility of plagiarizing. Another factor that related to lack of awareness was "ownership of work." This referred to turning in the same paper in two different classes, an action designated as cheating in most institutional policy statements, but not consciously viewed as dishonest by students. For the students who were aware that this was inappropriate behavior, they differentiated this

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behavior from other cheating behavior because the actual work was their own.

(c) Lack of competence (3). Students indicated that if other students could not do the work in graduate school they would be more likely to cheat or plagiarize or that acts of cheating in plagiarism themselves were evidence of lack of competence.

"If somebody's that incompetent [to plagiarize], they really shouldn't be in the program."

DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, given what we know about human behavior in general and cheating in particular, it appeared that for these students, the decision to cheat or plagiarize is a complex mix of factors--some which inhibit cheating and plagiarism, some that make it more likely. In a review of the literature, Jendrek (1989) identified research that focused on a variety of factors that related to academic misconduct, including faculty and student definitions of cheating and plagiarism, situational or environmental factors that affect cheating, personal characteristics of cheaters and noncheaters, and reasons students cheat. Her own research focused on faculty members' reactions to academic dishonesty. This study focused on students' perceptions and experiences related to cheating and plagiarism. These perceptions and experiences indicated that knowledge and definition of cheating and plagiarism and awareness of sanctions will have an influence on these behaviors, and that situational, environmental, and personal characteristics affect whether a student will cheat or plagiarize. These students also mentioned the role of faculty members' reactions (i.e., unwillingness to confront behavior) as a factor that contributed to the possibility of a student cheating or plagiarizing.

Also potentially contributing to the possibility of student cheating and plagiarism was the lack of orientation and any attempt to formally socialize these students into the norms and expectations of graduate work. While the students appeared to have a fairly accurate understanding of what constituted cheating and plagiarism, their lack of awareness of sanctions means that they may be unaware as to the seriousness of these behaviors, thus contributing to the possibility of participating in these behaviors.

In addition to the mix of factors influencing the behaviors, there was the issue of the influence of students' perceptions. For example, among the issues discovered in the analysis was that of "locus of blame" for cheating and plagiarism. This was evident when students discussed task pressure. If the students referred to themselves when discussing this issue, they tended to place the "blame" externally, on the fact that the course was too difficult or there was too much to learn. However, when considering other students, they tended to refer to issues of competence (an internal contributing factor), rather than the external factors they used in reference to themselves. For example, one participant indicated that there was no reason to plagiarize, "unless you're really stupid or don't understand the concept of the research of literature." Another participant mentioned several times the belief that "incompetent people are more likely to cheat." Greene and Saxe (1992) discovered, among undergraduates, a similar pattern of differentiating between self and others when considering dishonest academic behaviors. In their research, they discovered students defined as less dishonest those cheating behaviors in which

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they themselves had participated (e.g., working on individual assignments in groups).

IMPLICATIONS

Implications of this research are divided into those addressing issues of practice and those addressing issues of research.

Implications for Practice

Challenge faculty assumptions

One implication of this study is that graduate faculty in these programs and probably elsewhere need to explore and challenge their assumptions related to the meaning and prevalence of cheating and plagiarism among graduate students. There needs to be a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to the probability of or inhibit cheating and plagiarism in their programs. This knowledge can then result in decisions as to how to enhance those factors that encourage ethical and honest behavior and discourage academic dishonesty.

Implement formal orientation programs

For the most part, these students knew what constituted cheating and plagiarism. However, they were not sure or unaware of the sanctions that could be imposed for those students caught cheating or plagiarizing. Once again, this related to the lack of any formal orientation and the failure of faculty to discuss these issues with their students. Formal and ongoing orientation and socialization programs related to academic misconduct appear to be desirable for all graduate students, as Kalichman and Friedman (1992) have stressed for medical students. Research indicates that graduate student socialization is most often left to informal means. Typically, this means that the dominant student culture has an unobstructed influence on student understanding of cheating and plagiarism and on student behavior. In cases where the student culture encourages honest and ethical behavior this is not problematic. However, it is the assumption of a positive student culture that contributes to the persistence of the problem, especially since the failure of faculty to address or confront cheating and plagiarism was perceived by some of these students as either consciously or subconsciously condoning the behavior to some degree. Partello's (1993) research that found that actively discussing the issue of academic dishonesty with freshman reduced the prevalence of the behavior and May and Loyd's (1993) discovery that the use of honor codes decreased occurrences of dishonesty in undergraduates appear to be applicable to the graduate population as well.

Enhance specific inhibiting factors and discourage contributing factors

The suggestion to enhance specific inhibiting factors derives from the expectation that there are some inhibiting factors that faculty would not be interested in enhancing, such as the negative internal inhibiting factors of fear and guilt. There are also external inhibiting factors that would be inappropriate to enhance, such as changing the type of work required primarily to reflection papers and self-exploration papers. While this may be appropriate for a counseling program, it is probably unwise for medical training. Additionally, it is probably not possible (especially in the short term) to enhance internal inhibiting factors (e.g., personal confidence, positive professional ethics, desire to work and learn). However, it is possible to incorporate a

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search for these characteristics in an admissions process. Therefore, the admissions process should be reviewed for evidence of looking beyond academic credentials to evidence of personal characteristics desired in graduate students and the professionals they will become.

Inhibiting factors that could be enhanced include the probability of being caught, seeing cheating as dangerous, and recognizing the need for knowledge in the future. By addressing the issue of cheating and plagiarism, specifying sanctions, by more carefully structuring exam situations, and by investigating suspicious papers and other work faculty will increase the perception that those engaging in cheating and plagiarism will be caught. The counseling students in this study recognized that they would need a strong knowledge base in the future. Faculty in other programs could specifically identify and discuss with their students how cheating in their program is dangerous and how what they are learning in their program relates to their future success as a professional.

Just as with inhibiting factors, there are contributing factors that the faculty may be not interested in reducing. For example, rather than attempting to reduce task and time pressure, given the importance of challenge in a learning situation, professors may instead wish to increase support, such as workshops or discussions on time management, study skills, and task management. Also, just as in an admissions process faculty can look for evidence of personal confidence and positive professional ethics, they can also seek evidence of negative personal attitudes.

The two contributing factors most open to influence may be the perception that faculty are lenient in issues of cheating and plagiarism and avoid addressing the issues or confronting the behavior and the lack of awareness on the part of students. This relates to the first two practice implications of challenging faculty assumptions and implementing formal orientation. The important outcome of each of these implications is that the discussion of academic misconduct becomes public and specific.

Implications for Research

Varying expectations across educational levels

Given the expectations of two of the students in the study, an issue to be explored is whether there are differences in norms and expectations between undergraduate and graduate programs. These students expected that there would be differences, but, as of their interview, had not yet discovered any. This may be an assumption of many entering graduate students ("Grad school is going to be tougher, more rigorous, and demand more ethical behavior on my part.") that they discover is false.

Interaction of factors

Given the focused nature of this qualitative study, additional research (e.g., surveys of larger populations and different programs at various institutions) needs to be conducted. This study identified a number of factors that contributed to or inhibited cheating and plagiarism among these graduate education students. More needs to be known about these factors and their

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relationship to each other and resultant behavior. It is assumed that this is not a relationship where weighing the positive and negative influence of the factors will result in a determination of a behavior--cheating or not cheating. The relationship is probably more complex than that. For example in a study of undergraduates, Houston (1978) discovered a curvilinear relationship between cheating and anticipated success. Students at the extremes of the success-failure continuum (i.e., certain to fail, certain to succeed) were less likely to cheat. It was students who were unsure of success who were most likely to cheat, however, that behavior was moderated by the perceived risk of being detected (Houston, 1977). The relationship among and influence of factors among graduate students is likely to be as complex.

LIMITATIONS

This was a study of six students from three programs at one institution and cannot be generalized to other programs and other institutions. These students were also volunteers. Volunteers for a qualitative study of cheating and plagiarism will probably differ from the greater graduate student population in ways that we presently cannot determine. Therefore, generalization to other students within the same program is also suspect.

Additionally, because these students were interviewed at the beginning of their programs their attitudes and understandings related to cheating and plagiarism probably reflected a mix of influence from both their undergraduate and graduate cultures. This is especially the case if, as suspected by two of the students, there are different norms and expectations related to these behaviors at different levels of the education system. We assume that the socialization to graduate school norms and expectations was incomplete. Therefore, there may be additional factors that remain to be discovered and some of the factors identified may be of less influence or absent at the graduate level.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study and some of the few that have explored graduate student cheating have found evidence that graduate faculty avoid dealing with these issues, either in communicating with their students about appropriate and inappropriate behavior or in confronting the behavior when it does occur. The fact that there have been relatively few studies of cheating and plagiarism at the graduate level further substantiate the conclusion that until faculty understand and overcome issues of discomfort, studying and confronting cheating and plagiarism among graduate students will probably continue to be avoided and ignored.

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